

❖ Other Voices ❖

Most people respond to suffering and death by trying to avoid despair, but this coping mechanism only works for a time. Extreme loss and grief eventually immobilize us if they are never addressed. As Christians, we can help people reframe and reinterpret their experiences instead. Our liturgical calendar is a reminder that the grief of Good Friday comes before the joy of Easter Sunday. ... We are called to kneel, to listen, and to wait patiently with people in their suffering and death. God will use us to help families and friends grieve the loss of their loved ones. God will use us to help people die well.

A BIGAIL RIAN EVANS, *“Dying Well,” in *Health, Christian Reflection*, 22 (2007)*

Taking Jesus as a model, it is necessary for Christians to come to see their own dying as a venue where the possibility exists to find deepened self-understanding and to bear witness to God. In other words, dying must be made a part of living in the sense that one’s efforts at discipleship persist through this stage of life. Dying is not a time or a task that is devoid of meaning, divorced from God’s presence.

CHRISTOPHER P. VOGT, *Patience, Compassion, Hope, and the Christian Art of Dying Well* (2004)

Are we preparing ourselves for our death, or are we ignoring death by keeping busy? Are we helping each other to die, or do we simply assume we are going to always be here for each other? Will our death give new life, new hope, and new faith to our friends, or will it be no more than another cause for sadness? The main question is not, How much will we still be able to do during the few years we have left to live? but rather, How can we prepare ourselves for our death in such a way that our dying will be a new way for us to send our and God’s spirit to those whom we have loved and who have loved us?

HENRI NOUWEN, *Our Greatest Gift: A Meditation on Death and Caring* (1994)

This preparation for death must be practiced through our whole life, and the spark of faith must be continually fanned so that it grows and gains strength. Love, joined to it, will attract hope, which gives no cause for shame. None of these things, however, comes from us; rather they are gifts

of God to be sought by continuous prayers and petitions if we lack them; if they should be present, they must be strengthened so that they grow. ... [A]n action continually repeated will become a habit, the habit will become a state, and the state become part of your nature.

ERASMUS , “Preparing for Death” (1553)

I have found that most people answer the question [“How do you want to die?”] this way: “I want to die quickly, painlessly, in my sleep, and without being a burden.” Most of us do not want to be a burden because we don’t trust our children and/or other primary caretakers to make decisions about how we will die. We want to die quickly, painlessly, and in our sleep because when we die we do not want to know we are dying. Accordingly, we ask physicians to keep us alive up to the point that we will not know we are dying – and then we blame them for keeping people alive to no point. It is a wonderful double-bind game we play out on ourselves as well as on those committed to caring for us through the office of medicine.

STANLEY HAUERWAS , “Forward” in John Swinton and Richard Payne, eds., *Living Well and Dying Faithfully: Christian Practices for End-of-Life Care* (2009)

What does dying well mean for those who suffer “bad deaths” and for the loved ones they leave behind? Here the fact that dying well is not an individual practice but a shared one is especially significant. Death marks the end only of physical life; an individual’s presence, however, extends beyond death as one’s life is remembered and absorbed redemptively into the community that remains. The extent to which it is possible for the bereaved to find redemptive significance in the “bad death” of a loved one depends in large part on the practices of the community to which they belong. And the knowledge that one’s life will continue to matter to the community even after one’s death can be a powerful source of comfort for individuals living with the threat of sudden or violent death.

AMY PLANTINGA PAUW , “Dying Well,” in Dorothy C. Bass, ed., *Practicing Our Faith* (1997)

Many of us die badly not because we’re wicked or weak people, but because we simply haven’t been taught how to die *well*.... Death is frightening enough as it is. But our collective refusal to face up to it makes it so much more terrifying than it need be that we retreat ever deeper into denial, and this doesn’t bode well for how we’ll cope with our dying when it comes. You can’t really prepare for something you spend a lifetime avoiding.

KERRY WALTERS , *The Art of Dying and Living* (2011)